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ABSTRACT

The Academy of Casa Maria is a charter school for grades 6-8 located in southwest Detroit, Michigan. The school was established in fall 1994 to serve local youth most at risk for low academic achievement, behavioral problems, and dropping out of school. This paper describes the planning and development process and the attitudes of parents and students toward their former schools and the academy. Data were obtained from a survey of 20 percent of the academy's parents and from 41 percent of its students during winter 1996. Findings show that parents place high trust in the school and that students expect to receive their high school diplomas and be prepared for the world of work. Students perceived teachers at their new school as being more caring than were their former teachers. Parents perceived that the level of student-teacher contact was greater than in the traditional public schools, and expressed concerned about their children's self-esteem. Parents reported that they had transferred their children to the academy because they wanted them to receive preparation for job opportunities and to benefit from teachers who treat all students fairly. Students felt that their former schools had not cared much about them or were willing to help them learn; students wanted responsiveness. Four tables and two figures are included. (LMI)

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ED 410 641

# Academy of Casa Maria

**A Profile of the Academy of Casa Maria**

**Detroit, Michigan**

**Report to:**

**Board of Directors**

**The Academy of Casa Maria**

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**March 11, 1997**

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## Academy of Casa Maria
## Detroit, Michigan

### Background and History

The Academy of Casa Maria is a 6-8 public education institution located in Southwest Detroit, Michigan. The school is one of a new type of educational institution known as a "charter school" which were first legislated in Minnesota in 1991 and later established in Michigan in 1994. Charter schools are one component of a larger movement toward "school choice" which has become very popular in educational policy circles in the recent past. With growing concern among the general public about the performance of publicly-funded schools, charter schools and other choice-based reforms are seen by some as a means of injecting choice, competition, and accountability into education in order to improve school performance.

As a charter school, the Academy of Casa Maria is funded through a per-pupil allotment from the State of Michigan (similar to other public school districts), but differs in that it is not able to assess local taxes of its own. Its charter refers to the operating agreement - containing specific goals and objectives which the school is designed to meet - which was established between the school's board of directors and the state-approved agency which oversees the school's operations and monitors its progress. Charters may be granted by intermediate school districts, by school districts, or by public universities. In the instance of Casa Maria, the chartering entity is Wayne County Regional Education Service Agency (RESA).

The charter application was developed from an already existing alternative middle, 6-8 grade level, school (Casa Maria Academy) which had been in operation for four years in southwest Detroit drawing high risk students experiencing difficulty achieving in the regular public schools. The impetus for the development of Casa Maria Academy as an alternative school and now as (Academy of Casa Maria) a charter school was based upon what some community leaders in southwest Detroit felt that not only were large numbers of local youth not graduating from high school but that many students frequently found

themselves in trouble for exhibiting types of behavior that resulted in reprimands and school suspensions. It appeared that what was needed was to challenge these youth in some fashion beyond what was being provided by the regular public school system. Unless this were done the community could well face the prospect that significant numbers of this generation's youth would find themselves involved in legal altercations today and minimal paying jobs, prison, and welfare dependency in the future. While the school had been successful in meeting the needs of the students enrolled, funding difficulties over the year placed the school in a tenuous situation each year. Therefore when the charter school legislation created an opportunity for funding for a school to replace Casa Maria Academy, the Executive Administrator proceeded to develop a proposal during the final months of 1993. Relying on the guidelines and regulations for creation of a charter school, by early summer of 1994 the proposal was completed and submitted first to Central Michigan University for the first year and then to Wayne County RESA for the second year, (both educational entities designated by the state with the power to grant charters), which ultimately approved the charter application. The application was approved in the summer of 1994 - approximately one month before the school year began.

The charter application which was drawn up consisted of a legal contract and an academic contract which included a philosophy statement, a school administrative structure, and a specific curriculum plan - all of which were drawn up based upon state charter school guidelines and on the specific needs of the proposed student population.

The principle objective for the alternative school was to serve local youth who were most at risk of low academic achievement, behavioral problems, and dropping out of school. Generally, two kinds of youth would be targeted for this school. The first type of youth targeted for enrollment at Casa Maria Academy would be those who might be considered "high risk" youth. These youth tend to be performing poorly in school, are frequently involved in conflict with teachers and other students, and in some cases are even involved in youth gangs. Despite having experienced some of these difficulties, these high risk youth

had nonetheless expressed some interest in continuing in school. The second type of student encompassed all other middle school age youth based upon charter school legislation which required open enrollment procedures. As it turned out many of the second type of students admitted tended to be those whose parents were looking for a school with a safe environment where they could study and learn without fear of being physically harmed.

The decision to target youth at risk was intended to provide a second chance to youngsters who were on the verge of dropping out of school due to behavioral conflict with school rules and low levels of academic achievement. Hopefully by bringing youth-at -risk into an environment where close attention based on small class size and a sense of caring and cooperation by teachers and students would motivate students to achieve. Basically the developer of the Casa Maria charter school felt that delinquent prone youth who were being ignored in the regular public schools system might be able to succeed in a new and different environment. Consequently the charter school offered a sound mechanism for addressing those aspects of the educational process which are essential to making students more academically competitive and improving their interaction with the school and its staff. For other students the Academy offered parents, from their perspective, a safe haven for learning and socializing.

The next order of business in the establishment of the Academy of Casa Maria was identification of a site for the Academy and establishing a governance board. While legislation in Michigan has been generally favorable to those who want to establish charter schools, it is to some extent contradictory in that these schools are given money for educating students - but none for capital expenses such as obtaining school facilities. For some of the state's charter schools, this is much more of an obstacle than others, as those in more affluent communities with relatively well-off students and parents have far more resources for obtaining school buildings. In other schools - such as Casa Maria - this was a far more daunting task.

For purposes of identifying a site, the Executive administrator, visited approximately 20 potential sites - former schools and commercial buildings - almost all of which were lacking in adequate facilities

and acceptable building structure which met the school code . The chosen site turned out to be a school building housing a Lutheran school (St. Matthew's School) which was scheduled to close at the end of the school year. The proposed school building was located in southwest Detroit a block off a major city street, (Michigan Avenue). Approval for utilizing the selected facility for a charter school was granted by the city fire Marshall and the Departments of Labor and Public Health.

To secure a governance board which would oversee the operations of the Academy of Casa Maria board members and other individuals recommended by board members were invited by the Wayne County RESA, according to the charter school guidelines, to serve on the board if approved and funded. For subsequent years the Academy board of directors will nominate and elect members for the Board. The new board for the Academy according to the charter consists of nine individuals representing the diverse areas of the Detroit Metropolitan area all of which "must have a background and interest in the education of children", and would include a representative of the parents of children attending the school".

The Academy's first task was to create a process for informing interested parents and youth from the surrounding community of the Academy . To accomplish this goal the Academy's director relied on the distribution of flyers to churches, community business, human service agencies and local middle schools in the immediate area from which students had been recruited for the old Casa Maria Academy. Other methods of recruitment involved door to door distribution of flyers in key areas of southwest Detroit as well as the usual "word of mouth" advertising among community leaders who were asked to identify and encourage parents with youth from the groups identified to consider the charter school as a school option for middle school youth from southwest Detroit experiencing difficulty adjusting and achieving in the traditional public school.

Once this process had been completed, the Executive Administrator for the Academy who had also functioned as the Executive Administrator for the Casa Maria Academy began the process of hiring staff and creating a system for accepting applications and admitting students. Six teachers all with

teaching experience were employed, four of which had a state teaching certificate and two who had a degree but had not completed the necessary education courses to be eligible to take the state certification exam. Two counselors, both with a degree in social work were recruited to work with students as well as to interact with parents on a regular basis. The Academy also hired two tutors from the local community. Later during the school year, Madonna College, supported by a special grant from the Ford Motor Company, hired and assigned three students enrolled in the college with a work experience of tutoring students from the Academy.

The student application process began in August of 1994 for the first year and August of 1995 of the second year and closed the second week in February of 1995 for the first year and 1996 for the second year. The reason for holding open enrollment until February was to "replace" any students who might drop out of the Academy during the school year and not to increase the school size. Admission criteria for the Academy were based upon guidelines outlined in the school charter proposal which emphasized open enrollment. The advertisement process resulted in 49 applications for the first year of the academy from which 37 students were admitted. For the second year 80 students completed applications from which 64 students were admitted. All students were middle school age (grades 6-9) youth. It should be mentioned that students who were already enrolled in Casa Maria Academy were given first priority to enroll in the school followed by their siblings after which all other students were admitted on a first come basis. Admission was continued until a number was reached which the Executive administrator felt was sufficient to run the school in a fashion for students to learn. The study of the Academy of Casa Maria from which this monograph is written is based on surveys distributed to students, parents, and staff during the second year.

While the number of students admitted to the academy was not extraordinarily large for the first year the Executive Administrator due to a larger facility, decided to expand the number of students for the second year which explains why the number of admitted students increased from 37 to 69. However in

recent discussions with the former Executive administrator, she indicated that based on a two year experience, 60 students appears sufficient for a charter school for at risk youth to function efficiently. Beyond this number she feels that behavioral problems of students and management problems might interfere with the education mission of the Academy. The following is a breakdown of students enrolled in the academy for the 1995-96 school year. It should be noted that while 64 students were enrolled for the 1995-1996 school year, there was a drop off and replacement of approximately 10 students during the school year.

Casa Maria Academy Enrollment
1995-1996

| Total: | Girls | Boys |
|---|---|---|
| 69 | 21 | 48 |

## Description of the Academy

### Building Site

At the time at which the information was collected to complete this monograph, the Casa Maria Academy was housed in a former Lutheran school (St. Matthew's ) located in southwest Detroit. The school building which was used for the Academy which had been in use required minimum restoration. Furniture was not available in the school and therefore was obtained by three sources which included a small grant from a Detroit foundation and from (donations) two parochial school in the city which had closed recently. The school building consists of five classrooms and an administrative office. There is a cafeteria available where hot lunches provided by the Academy but supported by the federal school lunch program are available for students eligible to participate in the lunch program. Unfortunately there is not a gymnasium available for the student. However students were taken each day to a city recreational center for physical education activities. During the second school year the Executive Administrator was informed that the school building (St. Matthew's school building) would not be available for a second year, and so

the began the process of searching for a new facility in which the Academy might be expanded beyond its current space. Since the fall of 1997 the Academy of Casa Maria has moved to a new site located in the same geographic area and now administratively reports to Ser Metro of Detroit (Service, Employment, Redevelopment) a job training facility for post high school persons located in southwest Detroit. The new location is situated on a major street (Michigan Avenue) in Detroit but located in southwest Detroit.

***Staffing***

Staff were carefully selected for the Academy to ensure that they would be comfortable and supportive of the type of non-traditional students which were to be served by the Academy. All staff selected were provided with professional development experiences to enhance their skills in working with this type of student population. The selection of teachers was perhaps the most significant component of the hiring process, as teachers who expressed an interest and belief that all students could be motivated to learn and succeed were of particular interest to the administration of the new school.

Office staff selected consisted of individuals who had been active in the community in seeking ways to improve the educational opportunity for all youth. The Executive Administrator for the Casa Maria Academy, who had also functioned as the chief Executive for the Casa Maria Family Services and who had been the developer of the proposal, was selected as the head for the Academy. In addition to having teaching experience, the Executive administrator holds a degree in human resources development, has previous experience running a head start program and has developed and administered programs for high at risk youth. Perhaps the most important attribute held by the Executive Administrator is that, based on an interview by the researchers, she clearly embodies a belief that given the appropriate opportunity and support, all students can achieve which was key to the operation of any school and in particular the Academy. In addition, she was very familiar with the Southwest Detroit community and understanding of the type of youth which would be involved in the Academy. In addition her former experience in running a

family services agency with a focus on youth made her a natural for selection as the Executive administrator for the Academy.

## Summary of Survey Findings

### A Profile of Students, Parents and Staff

***Parents***

Obtaining an historical, demographic, and academic "profile" of the Academy required the collection of data through a survey instrument administered to parents and students and staff during the winter of 1996. While not all the parents and students involved in the Academy were able to be surveyed, from those who were surveyed it was possible to develop a fairly accurate profile of the type of parents and students participating in the Academy. This profile is of course more representative for students than for parents, as 41% of students were surveyed as opposed to 20% of parents. Notwithstanding these numbers, the researchers feel confident that the sample of surveys were sufficient to map out a good profile of the characteristics of the parents and youth.

*Education, Income, and Prior School Setting*

In the area of education, the survey discovered that of eight parents who were interviewed all had obtained at minimum a high school education, with one parent having some college education experience. It is clear from this data that most parents had been relatively successful in their own educational process. Perhaps even this success might have been one of the factors which motivated parents to transfer their youth to a school where it might be possible for them to obtain a high school diploma as they can been able to do. When surveying parental income levels, 7 of the 8 parents reported household incomes of less than $20,000, with 2 reporting incomes of less than $10,000. Generally, then, those parents at Casa Maria whom we interviewed might be said to be more concentrated in the lower income levels.

When considering where parents sent their children to school prior to enrolling in the Academy, the survey of parents reports that seven (7 ) of eight (8) who were interviewed attended a public school prior to transferring to the Academy. Only one parent reported having their child enrolled in a private school with no child having been transferred from a religious school - findings which perhaps somewhat surprising in that the Academy might have been predicted to attract parents who sought a private school-type education at public expense. As form of confirmation on the well be noted when student were also asked from where they had transferred , only four out fifty-six students indicated that they had previously attended a private or a parochial school.

*Sources of Parental Information About the Academy and Prior School Involvement*

How parents came to know about the Academy is a question which the administration of the school should be interested in for future student recruitment. Although several methods of advertising for the Academy were utilized, the survey discovered that 4 of the parents learned of the Academy from a community leader or friend, 2 from a teacher or staff member at the child's former school and only 1 learned of the Academy from an Academy staff member. Ultimately, it appears that there is not one predominant way in which parents learned about the Academy having attracted students in a variety of ways. However this uncertain way in which students are recruited may not help future targeted strategies for recruiting students. Also, the idea that the former school informed the parents of the Academy may be a blessing on the one hand as students are encouraged to relocate to a school which may be better able to help them. Yet concern must be expressed that schools do not seem to be taking a leadership role in attempting to reach all students but may depend upon an easy way of "getting rid" of students whom it feels it cannot educate effectively.

Parental involvement in school activities is critical to the academic success of the child. The survey reported 7 of the eight parents had attended an activity such as a meeting with a teacher, a parent-

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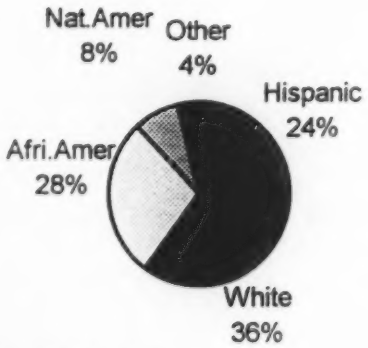
teacher conference, or a meeting with the school administration in their child's former school on a weekly, monthly, or semester basis. At least for those parents surveyed, it appears that for one reason or another, parents did visit their child's former school and were familiar with the school so much that the reasons cited later for their decision to transfer their child to the Academy may well have been done with adequate knowledge and justifiable reasons. Myths that lack of parental interest and attention to the child's education experience are responsible for low interest and achievement in school does not seem to the be cause for the students not performing well in school or seeking to transfer to the Academy. Perhaps the answer lies in other aspects of the school environment which were surveyed and are discussed in detail for both parents and students.

**Students**

A more in-depth look at the youth who make up the student body of the Academy of Casa Maria was made possible by the fact that surveys were obtained from 26 (of the approximately 69) students who were attending the Academy at the time when the surveys were distributed. This larger sample provides a better and more accurate picture of the youth attending the academy who were surveyed during the second semester of the 1996 school year. The chart on the left provides a breakdown of the students who were surveyed and clearly illustrates the cultural diversity of the students attending the Academy. Surveys indicated that the age range of Academy students interviewed is between the ages of 12 and 16. As illustrated in the graph to the left, the race or ethnic affiliation of the students represents the predominant groups in society. It also shows that




**National Origin**

the Academy has been successful in attracting a diversity of students. parents, it appears, regardless of ethnic or economic background are truly interested in the education of their youth so much that they have been willing to enroll them in a new school outside of the traditional educational structure.

***Past School Experiences of Casa Maria Students and Perceptions of Their New School***

Exploring the reasons why students were transferred from their former school to Casa Maria was amongst the foremost goals of this research. Students were therefore asked a series of questions to elicit information that would shed more light on this transfer decision. Some 46% of students indicated that they had requested that their parents send them, while 38% indicated that the parents transferred the youth without their input. The high percentage of youth which requested to be sent to the Academy indicates clearly that these youth were interested in learning and in finding a place where they can achieve - and were not necessarily interested, as might be predicted, in simply living out their school years as low-achieving students or as "trouble makers" or delinquents. Actually, according to the Executive administrator, helping students to reach out to their potential became the greatest challenge of the Academy as many of these students had a history of transferring from one school to another and so had never developed an allegiance to any school or an interest in studying and learning. Most of the students did not have good listening and studying habits which the Academy had to develop. Furthermore students were quite rebellious towards discipline and school structure which created problems in the classroom. However as the Executive Administrator reported, by the end of the school year, the students adjusted to the structure of the Academy and had developed the kind of work and study skills that made teaching easier and learning possible. This change in behavior and attitude can be perhaps better explained by the following information gleaned from the survey

An attempt to explain the high number of youth asking their parents to transfer them to the Academy can perhaps be explained by looking at their attendance patterns. The survey revealed that

although many students (73%) were attending school, it was not on a regular basis (with 32% reporting having attended school "not very often"). It is interesting to note that 4 of the 26 students reported that they were not attending school because of a suspension. Low attendance patterns clearly demonstrates that the students did not find the school enticing or stimulating enough to justify their regular attendance. The unfortunate reality is that students who lose interest in school-whether for academic or other reasons -often stop attending regularly and end up dropping out. The Academy of Casa Maria should pay close attention to attendance patterns as one predictor of interest and persistence.

Activities which students participate in within the school structure, - yet outside of the classroom- can have a strong influence on sense of loyalty to and involvement in the school. Stated in a different manner, school activities can and do influence a student's desire to attend school and "push themselves" academically even when they might not have a history of doing so. The survey found that 50% of the students at Casa Maria "seldom" or "never" participated in extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, etc.. This information may be an explanation for why students encouraged their parents to transfer them to the Academy, as from their perspective, there was nothing (either academic nor extracurricular activities) which sufficiently motivated them to stay in school. Involvement in extracurricular activities has been shown to be important for all students in developing a sense of attachment to the school, and this may be particularly true for higher-risk and lower-achieving students who otherwise see little reason to continue attending school. With these considerations in mind, it might be important for the Academy to consider providing in the future extracurricular activities that involve all students as a way to balance out their educational experience. These activities should, of course, be based upon the interests of the students, and this is certainly not to say that extracurricular activities should be pursued at the expense of academic concerns. Such activities, rather , might be seen as an effective "carrot" in motivating students to improve attendance and academic performance.

***Expectations of Students for Graduation and School "Responsiveness"***

In comparing their past (traditional public) school experience with that in their new (charter) school, students appear to have improved hopes for graduating since enrolling at Casa Maria and felt that the Academy was doing a better job of caring for and paying attention to their needs. The following table provides a clearer picture of this finding.

Table I
Comparison in Student attitudes between schools

| Activity | Casa Maria | Former School |
|---|---|---|
| Hopes for graduation | 77% | 54% |
| School cares for and pays attention to students | 62% | 50% |

The 77% of students who expect to graduate from high school since attending the Academy represent a significant improvement over the 54% who had such expectations in their former (traditional public) schools. This difference seemingly shows that students who have transferred to the Academy have witnessed an improvement in their educational expectations. Whether these expectations will change again (for better or for worse) during their future enrollment at the Academy seems largely dependent upon how well the Academy interacts with and motivates students to learn in ways that their former schools were unable to do.

The extent to which Casa Maria can interact with and motivate its students will of course be largely dependent upon the treatment (and perceived treatment ) of students and parents by the school, teachers and staff. These factors greatly influences the degree to which a student takes his/her education seriously, attends school regularly, and makes a commitment to learning. Stated a different way, students will perform academically if they feel that their teachers care about them and believe that they are capable of learning. Questions posed to Casa Maria students provide interesting commentary on how well the

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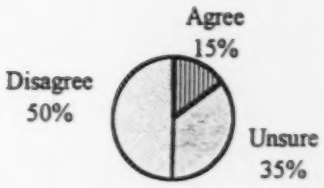
Academy and the students' former schools were performing in this respect. By a sight margin (12%) of Casa Maria students felt that the Academy cared more about how they were doing in school than had their former school. Essentially 62% of students felt that the Academy cared about their academic performance, with only 50% expressing a similar feeling but for their former school. However when students were asked if their former school treated students fairly without regard to sex, race, ethnicity and religious affiliation, 85% of students, as is represented in the chart to the left, were either unsure of did not feel that the former school treated all students fairly. What appears from this response is that in general students feel that the teachers in their former school differentiated in their treatment of students based on physical or cultural characteristics. This belief shared by students may perhaps account why only 15% of the students felt that that teachers were fair in their responsibility to helping them learn and succeed in school. This particular point should be of interest to the Academy staff who must demonstrate complete fairness in treatment of students if they expect students to trust in their dedication to teaching them.

**Former school treats all students fairly**




Questions about how students perceived the ability and willingness of teachers and school staff to help them learn showed a similar contrast between the Academy and the students' former schools. Thirty-eight percent felt that teachers in their former school were willing to help all students learn but an even larger percentage (56%) were unsure about how willing and able their former teachers had been. The role of school counselors was an interesting finding given the responsibility of these personnel in assisting students in dealing with problems encountered in and out of school. The survey revealed that slightly only 36% of students felt that counselors in their former school had been helpful to them. This relatively low number may be of interest to those who oversee Casa Maria Academy, as it illustrates the importance of

counselors to student who have had problems which interfere with learning and participating in school activities. Certainly the decision by the Academy to employ two counselors with the responsibility to not only counsel students but to meet with parents as well, should help students in resolving problems that interfere with learning.

If teachers are perceived as being unable or unwilling to help students learn while counselors are not perceived as helpful to students, then students are left without anyone in the school with concern about their personal lives. Most likely a "void" is created which must be filled for this type of student (who has, in many cases, significant personal and/or family problems) to experience success in school. This may be a major reason for students wanting to transfer to the Academy of Casa Maria , as students listed "responsiveness of teachers to the needs of students" as the major reason why they felt their parents moved them to the Academy. In fact only 16% of the students on another question felt that the former school was responsive to parents and students who have concerns. Incidentally students cited the same reason of lack of responsive to parents and students to explain why they felt that that the Academy is a better school to attend than the former school.

Two major observations may be made from the information above. The first is that a majority of the students did not feel that their former school had cared much about them as students or was willing to help them learn. Secondly, out of eleven possible causes given for students to select as to why they have attended the Academy, students selected "responsiveness of teachers to the needs of students" as one of their top reasons. This clearly illustrates an area in which Casa Maria will have to devote a great deal of attention in meeting the needs of its student population.

On a related point which touches on the ability of the school to create a comfort zone where students can learn and socialize in a safe setting , only 20% of the students indicated that the former school was a safe place to learn. This finding coincides with the students citing "making the former school safer"" as the top thing they would change in their former school to make it a better place to learn.

Other areas of limited support for the former school and which may also contribute to a willingness by students to transfer to the Academy appear in Table 2. For example, only 16% of students felt that their former school had done a good job in preparing them for the world of work. This low positive response coincides with the fact that all eight parents interviewed expressed a similar questionable support on the ability of the school to prepare youth for work and self sufficiency, both areas of critical importance to youth who will not continue on to a post secondary institution..

Table 2
Student Perceptions of Their Former School

| Areas of school function | SA & A * | SD &D* |
|---|---|---|
| Did a good job preparing students for college | 20% | 52% |
| Did a good job preparing students for job opportunities | 16% | 52% |
| Class size is satisfactory | 36% | 28% |
| Schools responded well to students/parents | 16% | 62% |
| Was a safe place to learn | 20% | 60% |

SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, SD - Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree

Overall, youth do not give their former school high marks in providing them with a quality and useful education in a safe learning environment. This is a significant finding in that the youth do not feel that they are being given the tools that will make them independent and successful adults. This point has clear implications for the staff of Casa Maria, who must concentrate their efforts on demonstrating to students that the Academy is willing and able to give students an education that will prepare them for the future and that it will guarantee a safe environment for carrying out its education mission. If this level of trust and commitment can be obtained by the Academy, students will likely respond by committing themselves to high academic achievement , high school graduation and even a post secondary experience. Establishing a record such as this by the Academy will be of great value in future recruitment efforts.

**How Parents Feel About the Academy**

The fact that parents transferred their youth from a known quantity (the traditional public school system) to an experimental school environment (the charter school) illustrates a strong desire on the part of parents to provide a better learning environment for their children. It was desired to know how parents felt about the Academy's performance in relation to their child's former school in various areas of the educational process.

An initial finding was that parents expressed strong expectations for their child to achieve academically in the Academy. Seven of eight parents surveyed felt strongly about the Academy's ability to provide a quality education. Furthermore, 7 of the 8 parents indicated positive feelings that their child would graduate from high school - which is important in that parents had expressed that their second greatest fear for their youth in their former school (after "being physically harmed") was that their child would drop out of school and not graduate. Casa Maria has won the initial trust of parents in this respect, but this carries with it the duty to live up to parents' high expectations for the Academy and its ability to succeed where their former school was unable to do so.

Good communication between the parent and the school to a great extent ensures that the parent can function as a support factor and a partner to the educational process being conducted in the school. Parents were therefore asked to identify the level of communication between the school and themselves. Not without surprise 7 of 8 parents indicted that the Academy has more contact with students than their former school. The power of this response takes on greater significance when we consider the fact that 6 of 8 parents were either unsure or simply felt that the area public schools did <u>not</u> respond to concerns by parents and in fact parents identified lack of response by teachers as the 2nd major reason for removing their child from the former school. It is also worth noting that parents cited "better communication between school and parents" as one the major reasons for deciding to send their youth to the Academy. And more, every parent surveyed stated that as a parent of a child attending the Academy, they wished to know from

the principal and the teachers about how their child is progressing in school. These responses clearly illustrate that parents are anxious to communicate with the school staff and are interested in expressing this relationship on a regular basis and certainly are not disinterested or uncaring of their child's education as many times public opinion might wish to portray parents of at risk youth.

To prevent a similar situation, in which Academy parents avoid interacting with its teachers and administration as they did in their child's former school, staff at Casa Maria will have to work hard at showing the parents that their concerns will be given proper attention. Again this will be particularly important as 100% of the parents indicated that they expect the Academy (both administration and teachers) to inform them how their child is doing in school.

An area of significance for Casa Maria staff and administration are the specific reasons for parents having transferred their child to the Academy. This is important for the Academy, of course, in that it must be aware of what functions and roles parents feel are important before it can provide them. The following areas illustrate how the parents felt their child's former school had carried out a particular school function, and whether this function had influenced their decision to transfer their child to the Academy.

Table 3

Parent Perception of School Functions and Student Impact*

| School Function | % of parents in Former School agreeing | influence on transfer Decision |
|---|---|---|
| Treat all students fairly | 2 or 8 | 7 of 8 |
| Did a good job in preparing students for college | 1 of 8 | 8 |
| Did a good job preparing students for job opportunities | 0 | 7 of 8 |
| Books and materials had an adequate focus on minorities (Latinos, Blacks, etc.) | 2 of 8 | 4 of 4 |
| Teachers in former school are willing to help all students learn. | 0 | 7 of 8 |

Total # of parents surveyed - 8.

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Parents expect schools to treat their child with respect and fairness and to function as parents in their absence. To gauge the degree to which the former school and the Academy were willing to do so, parents were asked to evaluate how they perceived this treatment. Responses to this inquiry showed that only 6 of 8 parents were "unsure" or "disagreed" that the regular public schools in their area had treated their child fairly. The same level of dissatisfaction is apparent by the fact than not one parent indicated that "the teachers in the former school are willing to help all students learn". These two responses take on greater significance when we note that 7 of 8 parents felt that the issue of fairness and the issue of willingness to help all students learn were major factors motivating them to transfer their child to the Academy.

As far as college expectations are concerned 5 of 8 parents involved with Casa Maria expressed a desire that their child would go on to college. While this figure is probably higher than that of parents in general in the area surrounding the Academy, it may well illustrate that parents have developed higher expectations for high school graduation and college attendance now that their child is enrolled in Casa Maria. In fact, all eight parents indicated that (from their perspective), the lack of effective college preparation of the former school influenced their decision to transfer their child to the Academy. This level of expectation should be viewed in contrast with the fact that 5 of 8 parents expressed a concern that when their child was enrolled in the previous school, they were most concerned that they would drop out of school and not graduate. This change in school attainment expectation places a particular pressure on the Academy given that parents have already established a new level of achievement which they envision the Academy being able to achieve.

Preparation of youth for the world of work has emerged as one of the principal functions of the public school. However when we look at how parents felt about the ability of their child's former school to prepare them for work we are confronted with some startling realities. All eight parents expressed dissatisfaction with the level of preparation which the school had provided, and 7 of 8 parents cited this

as a reason for transferring their child to the Academy. For comparative purposes, as has already been mentioned, students likewise expressed limited support (16%), for the former school's ability to carry out this school function. It is clear then that parents expect the Academy to address this issue in the curriculum and therefore information on careers identification and training should be a part of the Academy's schooling experience.

Positive self-esteem has been proven to strongly influence student academic success and make social life a more pleasant experience within the school setting. Therefore most parents are rightly interested and concerned with how their youth feel about themselves. Multicultural experts contend that one way in which self esteem can be enhanced is by maintaining a school environment which acknowledges and respects culture as a viable part of the educational process. Sensitive to this issue, many schools have begun to evaluate the level of "culture" (in the form of a multicultural and/or minority-inclusive curriculum) existing in the school which may act as an enhancement for the self-esteem of minority children. The survey found only two parents who felt that their child's former school had done a good job of providing educational materials with information about minorities. However, parents were evenly split as to the influence a multicultural curriculum serving as one of the principal factors which motivated them to transfer their child to the Academy. This information , at least from the a parental perspective, does not point to a strong voice that demands a minority inclusive curriculum. Yet because at least one half of the parents who were surveyed from their response do feel that the culture of the child is an important component of the school curriculum, it should perhaps be given continued attention in the development of the future curriculum at Casa Maria. At the same time it is important to recall that parents are more interested on issues of safety, responsiveness of the teacher and small class size and so these issues should be given maximum priority by the staff of the Academy.

Overall, parents were quite definitive in citing reasons for transferring their child from his/her former school to the Academy, and the kind of education they specifically expect that the Academy will

provide. A clearer picture of these expectations was obtained by having the parents identify three reasons for transferring from their former school and three reasons for selecting the Academy as the place for their youth to attend school. These responses follow.

**Table 4**
**Reasons for Transfer to Casa Maria Academy**

***Most Important Reasons for Parents Removing Child from Former School***

1. Safe school environment
2. Responsiveness of Teachers to concerns of students and parents.
3. Class size

***Most Important Reasons for Parents Deciding to Send Students to Academy***

1. Responsiveness of teachers to needs of students
2. Safe school environment
3. Better communication between school and parents

Reflecting on the fact that parents clearly identify safety, class size, and responsiveness of teachers as major areas of importance to parents leaves little doubt that they expect a school environment with staff who respond to their own and their child's concerns and are able to provide improved communication between parents and the school. To reiterate, the top three concerns shown in each category above clearly illustrate that among the foremost concerns of parents is that they (as do their children) expect the Academy to pay attention to their concerns and to maintain better communication with them.

The information presented in the tables and narrative above indicates, in summary, that parents are very concerned with the type of preparation which the school provides for students and also with the manner in which the students are treated. Parents further except the Academy to utilize , in a limited way, a curriculum which includes information about minority groups in order to enhance their self-esteem.

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Despite their children's' past difficulties in schools, parents clearly have a great deal of interest in the quality of education that the Academy provides. This information should be valuable to Academy staff and administration if it wishes to hold on to the students and provide them with the kind of educational experience which they and their parents expect. If the Academy neglects to respond to these concerns about the school's curriculum and environment, parents will search out and select other systems which they feel meet these needs. Clearly, the Academy would do well to keep these points in mind as it develops and implements its curriculum and overall strategy for attracting and maintaining its student and parent base.

**The Future of the Academy**

There is no question that the Academy has met a need of a specific student population in our schools. In almost every case, every youngster has expressed first the fact that the Academy has improved their expectation level to remain in school and that second , that the teachers in the academy are more attentive and caring. How strongly students feel about these two facts could well be translated into increased motivation by students to work more diligently in school. Parents likewise have expressed strong positive feelings about the ability of the Academy to help their youth learn and succeed as almost all of the parents indicated that the Academy has more contact with students than exists in the area public schools. Again this finding is valuable when we consider the direct relationship between effective communication and learning.

Based on the information which the survey was able to obtain from the parents and the students it is relatively clear that the Academy can help reverse the educational failure experienced by many youngsters in the current school system. This assertion on the part of the researchers does not in any way imply that the general public schools are at failure, but rather that the school because of its need to meet the needs of a immense diversity of youth with many learning styles and social needs, has been unable to adequately achieve this wide mandate. As a result youth at risk like those who selected to attend the Academy, have not been academically or socially successful in the school. Certainly the Academy stands

out in many respects as a salvation for these youth and could help many other youth with similar academic and social backgrounds.

The question will remain however if the Academy can survive financially. Currently the only source of funding is state aid. Local school districts have had the advantage of utilizing local millages for capital improvement while Charter schools have had to rely on donations, contributions and small grants beyond what the state provides in state aid. The Academy of Casa Maria currently survives almost totally on state aid. To maintain quality the Academy will ultimately have to secure other forms of funding to finance sound and safe structures for the education of youth.

**The Academy and the Community**

Throughout most of their history public schools have enjoyed strong support from the communities in which they are located. This long term relationship has resulted in a good formalized relationship and standing in the community. Newly emerging charter schools have yet to achieve this level of acceptance. However social research tells us that when a community experiences an unfilled social need but discovers an institution appealing and able to meet this need , it quickly adopts the institution as a part of its community structure. If successful the new institution will be come a viable part of the community's structure. To assess the level community support for the academy the survey sought to measure the level of social standing of the Academy in relation to the public schools in the area.

When both parents and youth were asked if they consider the public schools in the area as an important and vital part of the community only 3 of the 8 parents and 65% of the youth responded positively. In contrast a higher majority, all 8 parents and 75% of the youth indicated that the Academy now functions as a viable part of the community. From this information gleaned from the survey there is little doubt that the Academy, at least from the parents and youth associated with the academy, is no longer perceived as an experimental structure but now holds a legitimate and credible place in their community.

Such a high level of acceptance should undoubtedly help in future recruitment of new students for the Academy. Parents with youth experiencing similar problems, as those already in the Academy, searching out for alternative sources of education that will help their youth succeed may well look toward Casa Maria as the answer. In fact all parents and 77% of students indicated that they would recommend the Academy to other parents and youth.

## Conclusion

This monograph based on responses by parents and students about the former school and Academy leaves little doubt that in both instances the Academy looms as a positive and perhaps last opportunity for specific high risk youth to achieve in education. More important however the information which tells where the parents and students feel the former school has failed and where they expect the Academy to concentrate its efforts, is invaluable for future planning . In every aspect, the parents and students appear pleased with the Academy and appear to place high trust in its ability to provide a good quality education. Furthermore both students and parents expect the Academy to provide an education that will ultimately lead to a high school diploma or preparation for the world of work, something which they appeared to have expressed reservations about their former school. Hence, the observations made by the parents and students should be read and analyzed carefully by the administration and teachers of the Academy if they hope to continue to fare positively in the eyes of the students and their parents and make the educational experience a success for youth unable to achieve in the traditional public school.

One final note from the researchers. If not already completed, the Academy should survey the parents to ascertain what type of education they expect from the Academy. This information should help the Academy in periodically examining and reframing its educational mission. Second, the Academy should in some fashion inform the parents on a regular basis the successes and achievement of the

Academy and of its students. Keeping the parents informed on the status of the youth and the Academy should go a long way towards fostering an educational partnership between the Academy and the parents

The researchers for this report wish to thank the staff, particularly the director for permitting us to conduct the research and for assistance in the collection of data. In particular we wish to thank the parents and students for their willingness to complete the questionnaires. We hope that the report will assist the academy in continuing to provide a quality education for the youth enrolled.

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## Summary of Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Recruitment efforts appear to be effective in notifying parents and students. These same methods should be continued.

2. Casa Maria must avoid creating - or being perceived to have - an overly large and unresponsive bureaucratic structure. The school's staff and board of directors must work hard at showing the parents that their concerns will be given proper attention.

3. The Academy should closely monitor attendance patterns as one of the most basic - and necessary - indicators of the interest and performance of its students. These patterns should be compared, if possible, to students' attendance in their former schools as one benchmark for judging the Academy's success.

4. Funding permitting, the Academy may wish to consider providing, in the future, extracurricular activities as a way to balance out the educational experiences of students and to provide a "carrot" to keep students in school who may otherwise see little reason for doing so.

5. "Responsiveness of teachers to the needs of students" consistently emerged as the top reason given by parents for their dissatisfaction with their child's former school. This clearly illustrates an area in which Casa Maria will have to devote a great deal of attention in meeting the needs of its student population - perhaps through written correspondence with parents, telephone contacts, or social events.

6. Surveys indicated that parents expect the Academy to address the issue of career identification and training for children. This suggests that these areas should be incorporated as a part of the Academy's schooling experience

7. A culturally sensitive curriculum was indicated by parents as being an important component of the Academy's mission, and should be given continued attention as the future curriculum at Casa Maria is developed.

8. To maintain its quality and ensure its long-term existence, the Academy must seek to secure other forms of funding in order to finance capital facilities (buildings, computers, etc.) and programming for the education of its youth. Time permitting, school staff and/or board of directors may wish to create and continually update a "funding database" which includes governmental (Federal Register, etc.) as well as private sources (foundations).

9. It is recommended that the Academy conduct further surveys of its parent constituency to explore in more detail the type of education they expect to receive from the Academy. In conjunction, the Academy should regularly inform parents of the successes and achievements of the Academy and its students. Keeping parents informed will go a long way toward fostering a positive educational partnership between the Academy and its student and parent constituencies.

10. In order to avoid a feeling as existed in the former school that teachers were not fair in the treatment of students Academy staff must clearly demonstrate complete fairness in treatment of students if they expect students to trust in their dedication to teaching and helping them learn.